

Høidal, Oddvar K. 2013. *Trotsky in Norway: Exile, 1935-1937*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press. 414 pages. ISBN: 9780875804743.

The nineteenth-century American novelist and editor, E.W. Howe, proffered a plethora of sharp-witted quips that we only tend to fully appreciate with hindsight, one of which is “to be an ideal guest, stay at home.” However, Lev Trotsky was deported from “home” in the Soviet Union in 1929. After short exiles in Turkey and France, Trotsky became one of the most famous and controversial figures ever to reside in Norway, however reluctant he may have been as a guest and however reluctant Norway may have been a host. Trotsky’s time in Norway has received scant historiographical and bibliographical attention. Fortunately, Norwegian-born historian Oddvar K. Høidal at San Diego State University puts Trotsky’s relatively brief stay in perspective with this rich and fascinating account. This book, therefore, fills a significant gap in the literature. (It is a revised and expanded version of Høidal’s Norwegian-language edition on Trotsky and Norway that was published in 2009.)

Trotsky arrived in Norway on June 18, 1935, and he departed on December 19, 1936 after having been expelled by the same government that had earlier granted him asylum. In between, Trotsky experienced public controversy, personal hardship, censorship, house arrest, and internment, which significantly hampered his work during the 18 months he spent in Norway. Trotsky’s time in Norway, therefore, could have been described as short, difficult, and with little consequence. However, Høidal manages to paint a much more comprehensive and nuanced picture. Based on a wide variety of empirical sources—archival records and interviews with a number of key informants—Høidal elaborates on why and how Trotsky was granted asylum in Norway in the first place, his complex relationship with the Norwegian labour movement, and the role his exile played in the domestic politics and foreign policy of Norway of the time.

The Norwegian government’s struggle to reconcile fundamental democratic humanist principles related to the right to asylum, on the one hand, and pragmatic strategic domestic considerations and external diplomatic pressure, on the other, is particularly well-described and analyzed. Trotsky’s asylum was one of the main issues in the 1936 Norwegian general election campaign, and the minority Labour government in power was heavily criticized by other political parties, from the communists on the left to the far-right fascists, for having allowed him into the country. The risk of antagonizing the Soviet Union was another preoccupation. From Norway, Trotsky continued his efforts to establish a Fourth International. He also wrote and published his last major book and one of his most important works, *The Revolution Betrayed*, in which he explains how Stalin was destroying the ideals of the Bolshevik Revolution.

In the end, practical considerations seemed to trump fundamental human rights. Conveniently accused of violating the terms of asylum by continuing his political activity, Trotsky was secretly deported. On his way out of Norway, Trotsky wrote: “Never, anywhere in the course of my entire life ... was I persecuted with as much miserable cynicism as I was by the Norwegian ‘Socialist’ government. For four months these ministers, dripping with democratic hypocrisy, gripped me in a stranglehold to prevent me from protesting the greatest crime history may ever know” (258). Høidal substantiates why the so-called “Trotsky affair” is not regarded as a particularly proud episode in Norwegian history (Høidal’s Norwegian language edition from 2009 has the title *Et sår som aldri gror* [A Wound That Will Never Heal]). Well versed in literature, Trotsky himself compared his fate to that of Dr. Stockman in Henrik Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People* [*En folkefiende*], who was ostracized and hounded for telling the truth. Be that as it may, Norway was not the only nation having problems dealing with Trotsky. In fact, no democratic European nation was willing to accept Trotsky after his residence permit in Norway ended. Only then-distant Mexico, which had no diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union, could accept the controversial international revolutionary. Although Trotsky was assassinated by a Stalinist Soviet agent in Mexico in August 1940, his deportation from Norway may paradoxically have secured him a few extra months of life, as Høidal argues: “Had he been in Norway when the Germans invaded in April 1940, he most likely would have been trapped” (321).

With special interest to readers in Canada, Høidal argues that there were Canadians among the very few foreign visitors Trotsky received during his time in Norway (99). Unfortunately, Høidal does not provide further information about his Canadian visitors and their purpose. However, Høidal provides more details about the failed attempt by the Canadian writer, Charles Yale Harrison, to obtain an interview with Trotsky during his visit to Norway in September 1936 (193-4). Harrison, who was working on a book about Trotsky, took the denial from the Norwegian authorities very hard, and he challenged the decision in a major Norwegian newspaper. Harrison’s allegations of foul play reached the highest political offices, but to no avail.

All in all, this is a well-written, soundly organized, and meticulously researched book with only a minor slip: the Trotskyite newspaper *La Lutte Ouvrière* means *The Worker’s Struggle* in French, and not *The Struggling Worker* as translated in the text (108).

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